

The Master Key

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By JOHN FLEMING WILSON

CHAPTER XXIX.

Ruth to the Rescue.

IN honor of their engagement Sir Donald Faversham gently insisted that Ruth Gallon attend a ball which was to be given by the British officers. Ruth pleaded to be allowed not to go, but Consul Reynolds and his wife added their urgings to the baronet's, and even the time honored excuse of "nothing to wear" was firmly refused.

Though she said in thing to any one else about her feelings, she really could not refrain from accusing herself of disloyalty to John Dorr.

He was out in the hills risking his life to regain her fortune. Could she dance and take pleasure with a cheerful heart when she did not know whether he was living or dead?

However, she went and received the formal congratulations of a great many natty officers and the informal complaints of certain young Americans, who vowed that she was unpatriotic in choosing an English husband, and danced with Sir Donald and his friends and smiled and blushed at the compliments and frowned laughingly on the flirts and generally conducted herself as a happy bride to be should.

Faversham was delighted and told her so in many ways. And long after midnight, when Mrs. Reynolds was preparing to go home, he took Ruth out under the shadows of the garden trees and would have kissed her.

"Don't," she said simply.

"What is the matter, darling?" he asked tenderly.

She stared out into the darkness, and he saw the pallor of her face.

"I am sure something has happened to John."

Faversham frowned. It was too bad that this man should always come between him and his betrothed. But his voice was very gentle as he answered: "That is out of the question. Achmet is very faithful, and if anything had happened I should know of it."

Ruth shook her head and insisted that she was sure. The baronet laughed at her, but she was not to be put off.

"I know John is in trouble," she said determinedly. "If you won't help me I'll go myself!"

Sir Donald argued as strongly as he could and in vain.

"I'm perfectly sure that John Dorr is in trouble," she repeated. "He's all alone up there among those awful natives and—"

"Achmet is with him," interposed Faversham.

"—and some one must go right away and help him," Ruth went on.

"You poor girl!" murmured Mrs. Reynolds. "I know how you feel, but you must get some rest. We'll talk it over later in the morning."

She drew Ruth away toward her room, with a backward glance of whimsical comfort for the baronet.

Faversham watched them go, stood doubtful for a moment, shook his head and departed.

The consul's wife found Ruth too stubborn to handle by herself, for she insisted that, as no one else would go, she would set out herself, and to emphasize her assertion began to change from her ball gown into a riding habit.

The consul came out in dressing gown and slippers when Ruth, fully clad, emerged from her room, still resisting the importunity of his wife.

He added many common sense arguments, but Ruth would not listen.

"I know that he is in trouble," she repeated.

"But if he were, which is most unlikely, you couldn't help him," Mr. Reynolds said bluntly. "In fact, you merely make matters worse."

When they found her obstinate they took silent counsel of one another, told her to wait a moment and vanished.

The instant they were gone Ruth slipped out of the house and boldly turned her face toward the hills now black against the night sky.

All day she traveled, strangely alone in a populous country. Many natives she met, but they merely looked curiously at the white girl in western riding clothes, and as she avoided villages she escaped the notice of any one in authority.

She knew that when her absence was certain both Mr. Reynolds and Sir Donald would come after her.

Night came, and she was still pushing on, though hungry and weary. In the darkness she perforce kept to open paths, and it was on one of these that a panting native found her.

"Achmet!" she whispered when he raised his contorted face to hers.

In a few words he told her what had happened. "She said curtly, 'I know that. Where is he?'"

Sir Donald's former servant looked at her and remembered the strangeness of things done by white women.

He led the way back toward the hut, muttering now and again of the terrible things he had seen.

And while Ruth was thus defying all precedent and going to the aid of the man she loved Wilkerson had found himself again hemmed in, cut off in the darkness from escape to the city.

Though he and Dorr had driven the hillmen away from the hut and quenched their eagerness of assault, they still hovered in the little gullies, and on every hand the fugitive found himself confronted by a heard but unseen enemy.

He stole back to the hut and peered in. John was still bound in the chair, and Drake's body lay huddled on the floor.

He made his preparations quickly, piling some dried grass and fine rubbish against one corner of the hut.

When the pile was once alight he dumped some powder on it and ran.

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it that he had his reward, for she liked him as much as it was in her nature to care for any man, he thought. "He was an awfully good sort," she said to Wilkerson one night as they leaned over the rail and watched the long swells from the bow speed fan-wise into the infinity of the sea.

"Yes, the fellow had his good points," he admitted.

"I miss him," she said simply. Later she added thoughtfully, "I think he was in love with me."

Wilkerson laughed. Mrs. Darnell glanced at him with an expression strange on her handsome face. "Yes, I am sure he loved me."

"In vain," he returned lightly. "I don't know whether it might have been wholly in vain after all," she murmured. "Life has given me little love of that kind. It seems as if I had always been a woman who for mere self protection could not let any one love me or let myself love him."

"I should not have let you love him," was the quiet response. "I have struggled too hard and fought too long for you to allow any one else to have you."

"And what does your love amount to, after all, Harry?" she asked. "Tell me plainly. Has it done either of us any good? Will it ever do us any good?"

Wilkerson stared out at the dark sea, and his face grew slowly very cruel. "Good?" he repeated. "All that I know is that I love you more than anything else in the universe. You love luxury and jewelry and gold and silk. Because I know what you love I am trying to get it for you, because I want you more than I want anything else. I—I think we are even."

"Even?" she said in a suddenly strained voice. "Yes, we are even—the felon and the murderer, I the receiver of stolen goods, stolen happiness, stolen life, stolen gold."

When they finally reached San Francisco Wilkerson found her oddly distraught. She did not know whether to go to the mine or to return to New York.

One moment she was in a tiger's rage, the next hour she was staring at the fog haunted hills with eyes that saw nothing.

He stormed and argued to no purpose. He recalled to her constantly the fact that he had the deeds, the master key itself, the plans of the location of the mother lode.

She either listened listlessly or drove him away with furious upridings. Yet in the end she accompanied him to Silent Valley.

It was a bitter moment for old Tom Kane when the stage drove up and Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell got out instead of John Dorr and Ruth.

He had hoped against hope, and now his dreams were in ashes, for Wilkerson instantly took charge, the men, as Tom put it to himself, followed the paymaster, and so far as outward appearance went the "Master Key" mine was firmly in Wilkerson's possession.

Mrs. Darnell here proved herself the shrewdest mind. Though she was little seen, her influence was potent.

And more than anything else she worked on Wilkerson so that he did not use the plans and open up the rich vein.

"Wait," she told him. "Don't be impatient. Our whole power here is in the fact that we have the secret. Once that is public we'll likely lose everything."

"But we ought to be at work before Dorr gets back," he would argue.

"Yes, and every court in the land will help him to regain this mine and its wealth. Don't you see? Compromise!"

"Compromise!" he repeated dully. "Yes, you fool!"

"But how?"

"Wait—wait till John and Ruth get back. They'll be glad enough to buy those plans, Harry."

When John Dorr and Ruth arrived on the following steamer Everett met them at the pier and told them the news as he had gathered it from faithful Tom Kane, whom Jean Darnell had insisted should resume his duties as cook, sagely observing to Wilkerson that it would be well for them to have a witness whose veracity Dorr would not impugn.

Settled in the hotel, Dorr briefly recited the experiences of the past months and then bluntly asked, "What are we to do?"

Everett was ready with his answer. "Compromise!"

The dull red flooded John's face, and he bit his lip. Had all his work gone for nothing?

Everett laid a friendly hand on his knee. "Now listen," he said gravely. "Here is Miss Ruth minus her key, practically ousted from possession of her property and, if we are not mistaken, unable to lay her hands on her most precious inheritance—the plans of the mother lode. They're in Wilkerson's possession."

"And he's digging the gold night and day!" John burst out.

With a swift glance to reassure Ruth, who sat in mournful silence, Everett went on:

"That is the shrewd part of Wilkerson's play. He knows that the law will give Miss Ruth back her mine and all that it contains. It would take time, but as sure as we are sitting here, and no one knows it better than he—justice would strip him of every ill gotten cent and send him to prison with his accomplice. So what does he do? Hastily uncover the real prize? No. He conceals it still and merely works the original mine."

"But we can put him out of father's mine, can't we?" demanded Ruth.

"And when we do we shall still be no wiser as to the location of the real gold. All our trouble and expense will have gone for naught. Wilkerson will still hold the secret of the 'Master Key.'"

Key."

"And how are we going to get it from him?" demanded Dorr, clenching his fist.

Everett smiled. "By buying it from him."

"He will ask millions!"

The broker smiled again. "Consider Wilkerson's position for a moment. He is liable to arrest, trial and long imprisonment on a dozen charges. Within twenty-four hours we can have him behind the bars. But we wouldn't be helping ourselves much would we? Yet Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell don't want to go to jail. We hold that club over them."

"They have the secret we must have and we can ruin their lives. Therefore we make a trade. We give them as surety that we will not prosecute them, that we will even enrich them, if need be, and they in return for this hand us over the plans that Thomas Gallon made."

CHAPTER XXX.

"I—I thought you loved me too!"

RUTH had listened intently, and now she seemed to draw her self a little out of the conversation. Her change of attitude did not go unobserved, and both Everett and Dorr were puzzled.

Everett saw that there was another mystery of which he knew nothing and instantly and in the most businesslike manner turned to Ruth and said:

"Now, all this subject to your approval, Miss Ruth. You know you are practically of age."

She looked at Everett steadily and said in a low tone. "I think Sir Donald Faversham should be consulted."

"But he has nothing," John began. "He has everything to do with this plan," Ruth said steadily.

"I know he's done a good deal," Dorr stammered, feeling the ground give under his feet. "But in this matter?"

"I think Miss Ruth is perfectly right," Everett said quickly, trying not to let the pity he felt for John show in his eyes. "Let us call him, by all means."

Sir Donald had kept himself most discreetly in the background for many weeks. Only the constant oversight for her comfort showed Ruth that she was never out of his mind.

She could not even think of him without a throb of gratitude.

And now when all must be made plain and she must live up to her own promise she steeled herself for the ordeal.

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Sir Donald listened to Everett's plan and approved it thoroughly.

"And now that we have decided what to do," he concluded, "I think we should immediately go to the mine and make the—uh—the deal. I by no means like this affair, and the sooner it is over with the better."

"Good," said Everett, much relieved. "And you and I, Sir Donald, being the third parties, had better handle this deal. Do you agree to that, John?"

"I'd like to just get my hands on that fellow once more," was the hoarse response. "There would be no further need of this 'deal' as you call it."

"Yes and the fat would be in the fire," Everett replied.

Dorr finally agreed to maintain a strict neutrality and Ruth gratefully accepted the offer to conduct her affairs as Sir Donald and Everett should judge best.

That night they left for Silent Valley.

Tom Kane received them joyfully and informed Ruth that Mrs. Darnell had especially seen to it that the bungalow was ready for her.

He was full of other news, but both Sir Donald and Everett put him off and set about their business.

It was a strange conference that met that night in the office. On one side were Harry Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell, on the other Everett and Faversham, the latter looking so intensely bored that shrewd Mrs. Darnell instantly made up her mind that she and Wilkerson would have to accept bitter terms.

Sir Donald was only too evidently waiting for formalities to be over before he said the few words necessary for him to say as Ruth's representative.

Wilkerson himself felt, too, that he was at last playing a game where all

and forth over a blue print on the desk. "We quit, give you the plans and you give us"—he suddenly leaned over and darted a bright glance into Everett's eyes—"you give us what?"

Everett was prepared for the question and answered it promptly. "We'll give you \$50,000 cash and won't prosecute you."

Wilkerson shook his head. "You understand that half this mine was mine by rights when Tom Gallon took it for himself by shooting me and leaving me to die in the desert. Fifty thousand? Pah!"

"And immunity from prosecution," stated Sir Donald impassively.

Wilkerson swung on him, thrusting his lean, furious face close to the Kingfisher's calm, unperturbed countenance.

"What have you to do with this?" he snarled.

Faversham did not shift his position for change his tone. "I have Miss Gallon's promise to marry me."

There was a sudden silence, broken only when Wilkerson's dry throat uttered a triumphant croak.

Mrs. Darnell looked at Faversham with her tawny eyes filled with dull embers of passion. Everett sat as if stunned.

"So John Dorr gets the kicks and you get the halfpence!" said Wilkerson wildly. "I have cursed him, but all my curses couldn't have punished him worse. Why, he went on half hysterically, 'the poor fool loves her!'"

Again silence.

This time Everett broke it, saying stiffly: "You understand our proposition. Do you accept it?"

Mrs. Darnell laid her hand on Wilkerson's arm, and he seemed to fall into a profound reverie.

They could see the lights and shadows flit over his saturnine visage, the sparkle of his eyes dying into a mere dreamy glow, the sudden tightening of his thin lips, the working of his hands.

Finally he roused himself as by an effort.

"I think I ought to have more," he said quietly. "There are signs of gold on one part of this property which has never been worked. It is nowhere near the place marked in the plans, as you will easily see. You understand that Tom Gallon and I were partners when he located that rich ore. Never mind. Bygones are bygones. But I want \$50,000 and that little claim. It may not amount to anything, but then again it may. Fifty thousand is soon spent. A mine is a